A Brief Historical Overview of the Jewish People

Book of Observations

About four thousand years ago, Abraham and Sarah left Ur of the Chaldeans and journeyed to the land of Canaan. According to the biblical tradition, it was there that God made a covenant with Abraham. Later, Abraham purchased the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron, which became the family burial place of the patriarchs.

Several generations later, the descendants of Abraham, through Isaac and Jacob (Israel), moved to Egypt. In time, they were enslaved. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and guided them through the wilderness for forty years. On Mount Sinai, he received the Ten Commandments, which became a moral foundation of the biblical tradition.

After the death of Moses, Joshua led the people into the land of Canaan. Later, King David united the Israelite tribes and made Jerusalem the capital of his kingdom. His son Solomon built the First Temple.

After Solomon's death, the united kingdom split into two parts: the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern Kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom was conquered by Assyria, and the ten tribes of Israel disappeared from history as distinct communities.

Later, Judah was conquered by Babylon. The First Temple was destroyed, and a large part of the population was taken into captivity. Yet the memory of Jerusalem and Zion endured.

In 538 BCE, following the decree of Cyrus the Great, the Jews were permitted to return to their homeland. They rebuilt Jerusalem and constructed the Second Temple.

Persian rule ended after the conquests of Alexander the Great. Following his death, Judea came under the control of Hellenistic states, and the influence of Greek culture spread rapidly throughout the region.

In the second century BCE, the Maccabean Revolt led to the creation of an independent Jewish state, which lasted for about eighty years.

Later, Roman influence grew stronger. King Herod the Great began a vast reconstruction of the Second Temple, which became one of the most magnificent structures of the ancient world.

It was during this period that Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish teacher from Galilee, lived and preached. According to the Gospels, he drove the merchants from the Temple. These events later contributed to the emergence of Christianity.

In 66 CE, a revolt against Roman rule began in Judea. In 70 CE, Roman forces destroyed Jerusalem and the Second Temple.

The fortress of Masada became the final stronghold of the rebels.

About sixty years later, another revolt broke out under the leadership of Bar Kokhba. It was brutally suppressed by Emperor Hadrian.

Afterward, Jews were forbidden to live in Jerusalem. The province of Judea was renamed Syria Palaestina.

Jewish life, however, did not disappear. Large communities continued to exist in Galilee, Babylonia, Yemen, and other centers. The Mishnah, the Gemara, and the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds were compiled.

In 351, another major uprising took place, and it too ended in defeat.

In 614, during the war between Byzantium and Persia, the Jews sided with Persia and took part in the capture of Jerusalem.

In the seventh century, the history of this land changed once again. In 636, Arab armies advancing from the Arabian Peninsula defeated Byzantium and established their rule over Palestine.

From that time onward, the position of the Jewish population gradually changed. Over the following centuries, Jews became a minority in their historical homeland. Many left the country for economic reasons, losing their land, homes, and ability to pursue their customary occupations.

The Jews were the indigenous population of this land, whereas the Arab population appeared here as a result of later waves of migration. This question remains a subject of historical debate.

Over the next thousand years, control of the land changed hands many times. Arab rulers were followed by the Crusaders, then Saladin, later the Mamluks, and finally the Ottoman Empire.

Yet the memory of Jerusalem did not disappear.

For many centuries, the words “Next year in Jerusalem” were spoken in Jewish prayers and became a symbol of the hope of return.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a new wave of Jewish immigration began. The newcomers purchased land, established farms, built businesses, planted orchards, and founded new settlements.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Jews once again constituted the majority of Jerusalem's population.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Zionist movement developed into an organized national movement of the Jewish people.

By the end of the nineteenth century, political Zionism had emerged against the background of growing antisemitism. Its leading ideologue was Theodor Herzl. He believed that the persecution of Jews in Europe would not end by itself and that the Jewish people needed a national home of their own—a secure refuge in times of danger.

Herzl devoted the final years of his life to this idea. He met with German Emperor Wilhelm II, sought the support of Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II, and worked to gain international backing for the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. According to the recollections of contemporaries, during his negotiations he sometimes referred to the parable of Androcles and the Lion as a symbol of gratitude for timely assistance.

When it became clear that this plan could not be realized immediately, Herzl agreed to consider the British proposal for a temporary Jewish settlement in East Africa—the so-called Uganda Plan. However, most members of the Zionist movement insisted that the ultimate goal could only be the historic Land of Israel.

After Herzl's death in 1904, the Zionist movement remained faithful to his central idea. At the Seventh Zionist Congress in 1905, the East Africa proposal was finally rejected, and the Land of Israel was reaffirmed as the movement's goal.

During the First World War, British forces occupied Palestine. In 1917, the Balfour Declaration was issued, supporting the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.

In 1947, the United Nations adopted a plan to partition Palestine into two states—one Jewish and one Arab.

After the tragedy of the Holocaust, the Jewish philosopher and rabbi Emil Fackenheim gave memorable expression to what many call the 614th commandment. It is often stated in one short sentence:

“Do not give Hitler a posthumous victory.”

These words remind us that every new day in the existence of the Jewish people, every preserved tradition, every family, every child, and every good deed become an answer to those who tried to destroy this people. That is why the history of the Jewish people continues to this day.

Vlad Polevoy